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PATENT

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10 FRICITION STIR WELDED ASSEMBLY AND METHOD OF

FORMING A FRICTION STIR WELDED ASSEMBLY

Background of the Invention

This invention pertains to friction stir welding and
15 friction stir welded assemblies. More particularly, this
invention pertains to stir welded T-joints connecting
relatively thin rib members to relatively thin sheet portions
of material.

Friction stir welding provides advantages over other
20 methods of welding. Perhaps the most significant advantage is
that friction stir welds maintain a significant percentage of
the strength associated with the material of the welded
members. This allows for strong welded joints without
requiring subsequent annealing and heat treating. Thus, in
25 situations where an assembly cannot be annealed and/or heat

treated, friction stir welding may be the only acceptable method of welding such an assembly.

Despite these advantages, there are also several disadvantages associated with friction stir welding. One such 5 disadvantage is that the stir welding tool utilized to form a stir weld exerts an appreciable amount of force against the assembly during the stir welding process. Thus, this force must be reacted by the assembly and the assembly must be sufficiently strong and rigid so as to avoid breakage and/or 10 unacceptable deflection. Another disadvantage is that the movement of the stir welding tool relative to the components of the assembly can cause undesirable movement of the components relative to each other. Yet a further disadvantage 15 is that relatively precise movement of the stir welding tool is required during welding and, as a result, this movement must generally be automated using complex machinery such as CNC vertical or multi-axis milling machines.

Summary of the Invention

20 The present invention addresses some of the disadvantages associated with prior art stir welding techniques. In particular the present invention resolves problems associated with forming stir welded T-joints between relatively thin walled ribs and skin sheets. Additionally, the present

invention addresses problems associated with the tooling required when forming a stir weld of such an assembly.

In a first aspect of the invention a method of stir welding T-joints comprises assembling a first member to a second member and stir welding the first member to the second member. The first member comprises a thin sheet portion of material having opposite first and second faces and also comprises opposing restraining surfaces that are oriented at an angle relative to the first face of the sheet portion. The second member comprises a rib that has a terminal edge margin. The assembling of the first member to the second member comprises engaging the edge margin of the rib of the second member with the first member in manner such that rib of the second member extends at an angle away from the first face of the first member and such that the edge margin is positioned between the restraining surfaces of the first member. The stir welding includes engaging a stir welding tool against the second face of the first member and occurs with the first and second members being assembled to each other as discussed above. During the stir welding, the restraining surfaces of the first member limit movement of the edge margin of the second member relative to the first member.

In another aspect of the invention, a method of stir welding comprises forming first and second members from

material. One of the first and second members comprises a tooling portion formed as a contiguous portion of the material of the respective member. The first member comprises a thin sheet portion formed as a contiguous portion of the material

5 of the first member and the second member comprises a rib formed as a contiguous portion of the material of the second member. The rib has a terminal edge margin. The method further comprises utilizing a stir welding apparatus to stir weld the edge margin of rib of the second member to the sheet

10 portion of the first member in a manner forming a stir welded T-joint. The first and second members are secured to the stir welding apparatus via the tooling portion during the stir welding. The method yet further comprises a step of separating the tooling portion from the first and second

15 members after forming the stir welded T-joint.

In yet another aspect of the invention, a T-joint comprises a rib member and a sheet member. The rib member has opposite first and second faces. The sheet member comprises a thin sheet portion of material having opposite first and

20 second faces and also comprises at least two restraining surfaces that are oriented at an angle relative to the first face of the sheet portion. At least one of the restraining surfaces of the sheet member is engaged with the first face of the rib member and at least one of the restraining surfaces of

the sheet member is engaged with the second face of the rib member. The sheet member is stir welded to the rib member.

While the principal advantages and features of the invention have been described above, additional features and
5 advantages may be obtained by referring to the drawings and the detailed description of the embodiments, which follow.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 is perspective view of a first member having a
10 thin sheet portion in accordance with the invention.

Figure 2 is perspective view of a second member having a rib in accordance with the invention.

Figure 3 is perspective view of the first member assembled to the second member in accordance with the
15 invention and is shown with a portion of the first member removed for purposes of explaining the invention.

Figure 4 is a partial cross-section view of the first and second members depicting the stir welding process.

Figure 5 is a partial cross-section view of an
20 alternative embodiment of first and second members in accordance with the invention.

Figure 6 is a partial cross-section view of yet another alternative embodiment of first and second members in accordance with the invention.

Reference characters in the written specification indicate corresponding items shown throughout the drawing figures.

5 Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiments of the Invention

The preferred method of practicing the invention pertains to stir welding first and second members. The first member 20 and the second member 22 are shown independent of each other
10 in Figures 1 and 2. Each of the first and second members 20,22 is preferably formed as a single monolithic piece of contiguous material. The material is preferably aluminum, although other materials suitable for stir welding, such as steel or plastic, could be used in place of aluminum.

15 The first member 20 preferably comprises a sheet portion 24, a tooling portion 26, and a plurality of protuberances 28. The sheet portion 24 of first member 20 is a generally thin walled structure having opposite first and second faces 30,32. The sheet portion 24 is also preferably planer. The tooling portion 26 preferably comprises a relatively rigid loop of material surrounding the sheet portion 24. The tooling portion 26 also preferably comprises a plurality of mounting holes 34 used for assembling and aligning the first and second members 20,22. The protuberances 28 are preferably elongate
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protrusions and are preferably rectangular in cross-section, as shown most clearly in Figure 4. The protuberances 28 are preferably grouped in pairs and preferably extend perpendicularly from the first face 30 of the sheet portion 5 24. Each pair of protuberances 28 forms a groove 36 therebetween defined partially by opposing surfaces 37 of the protuberances.

The second member preferably comprises a plurality of ribs 38, a sheet portion 40, and a tooling portion 42. Like 10 the first member 20, the sheet portion 40 of second member 22 is a generally thin walled structure having opposite first and second faces 44,46 and is also preferably planer. Also like the first member 20, the tooling portion 42 of the second member 22 preferably comprises a relatively rigid loop of 15 material surrounding the sheet portion 40 and preferably comprises a plurality of mounting holes 48 used for the same purpose of assembling and aligning the first and second members 20,22. The ribs 38 of the second member 22 extend from the first face 44 of the sheet portion 40 and are 20 preferably thin walled structures having opposite first and second faces 50,52. The ribs 38 are preferably rectangular in cross-section and preferably extend perpendicular to the sheet portion 40, eventually terminating at edge margins 54.

The first and second members 20,22 are preferably each machined from plate material using a high speed milling machine. However, it should be appreciated that other techniques such as molding could be used to form the first and 5 second member 20,22. During the high speed machining, the mounting holes 34,48 of the tooling portion 26 of the respective member 20,22 are utilized to secure the members to the milling apparatus. The tooling portion 26,42 of each of the members is left appreciably robust in comparison to the 10 remainder of the respective member so as to prevent excessive distortion of the thin walled structures during the milling and welding processes.

After forming the first and second members 20,22, they are then assembled to each other as shown in Figures 3 and 4. 15 The mounting holes 34,48 of the first and second members 20,22 facilitate the alignment of the members and also allow the members to be secured to each other and to a stir welding apparatus (not shown) using bolts extending therethrough. When assembled, the edge margin 54 of each rib 38 is 20 positioned in one of the grooves 36 formed by the protuberances 28 of the first member 20. Each groove 36 is dimensioned to be equal to in width to, or only slightly wider than, the distance between the first and second faces 50,52 of the respective rib 38. Thus, it should be appreciated that

the opposing surfaces 37 of the protuberances 28 forming the groove 36 act as restraining surfaces that can engage the rib 38 to prevent it from translating with respect to the first member 20 in a side-to-side manner (with reference to Figure 5 4).

After the first and second members 20, 22 have been assembled to each other and secured to a stir welding apparatus, they are then stir welded to each other. Preferably, the same milling machine used to form the first or 10 second member 20, 22 is utilized as the stir welding apparatus. To form a weld, a stir welding tool 56, shown schematically in Figures 4-6, is pressed against the second face 32 of the sheet portion 24 of the first member 20. During the welding, the stir welding tool 56 is rotated and moved in a manner such 15 that it remains aligned with the grooves 36 and ribs 38. The tip of the stir welding tool 56 extends through the sheet portion 24 of the first member 20 where it engages with the edge margin 54 of the respective rib 38 (as depicted on the middle rib shown in Figure 4). This causes the sheet portion 20 24 and also preferably the protuberances 28 of the first member 20 to fuse to the edge margin 54 of the rib 38, thereby forming a stir weld 58 (as depicted on the right most rib in Figure 4). During this process of welding the ribs 38 to the first member 20, the protuberances 28 prevent the ribs from

deflecting away from the stir welding 56 tool, as would otherwise likely occur. Thus, it should be appreciated that no additional tooling is required to maintain the relative position between the ribs 38 and the first member 20 during 5 the stir welding process. Moreover, the tooling portions 26,42 of the first and second members 20,22 rigidly secure the members to each other and to the stir welding apparatus, thereby eliminating the need for additional tooling for such purposes.

10 After the stir welding has been completed, the tooling portions 26,42 of the first and second members 20,22 are separated from the welded assembly. This is preferably done using a cutting tool provided on the same milling machine used to perform the stir welding. Once this is done, the assembly 15 is complete.

Figure 5 depicts an alternative embodiment of the first and second members. In general, this embodiment has the same features as described in reference to the embodiment shown in Figures 1-4. However, the protuberances of the first member 20 and the edge margins of the ribs of the second member have a different configuration that is configured to further secure the first and second members to each other during the stir welding operation. Basically, rather than being rectangular in cross-section, the edge margins of the ribs are T-shaped,

as are the grooves formed by the protuberances. This results in the formation of locking surfaces 60 on the protuberances and locking surfaces 62 on the ribs that cooperate in a manner preventing the first member from moving vertically (as shown) 5 away from the second member. It should be appreciated that this embodiment requires first and second members to be configured in a manner such that the ribs of the second member can be slid into the grooves of the first member during the initial assembly of the first and second members to each 10 other. Thus, it is assumed that the grooves of this embodiment are all parallel to each other and that the grooves are open at one end to allow for the insertion and sliding of the ribs thereinto.

Figure 6 depicts yet another alternative embodiment of 15 the first and second members. Like the embodiment shown in Figure 5, the grooves of the first member and the ribs of the second member have T-shaped cross-sections. Thus again, locking surfaces 64 on the protuberances and locking surfaces 68 on the ribs 38 are formed that cooperate in a manner 20 preventing the first member from moving vertically (as shown) away from the second member. However, the protuberances of this embodiment are also shaped to include camming surfaces 68. The camming surfaces 68 are angled with respect to the first face of the sheet portion of the first member. Each

protuberance of a pair of protuberances forming a groove has such a camming surface 68 that converges toward the camming surface of the other of the pair of protuberances as they extend toward the sheet portion of the first member. The 5 camming surfaces 68 are configured to allow the first and second members to be initially assembled to each other by snapping the ribs (vertically as shown) into the grooves. As a rib is inserted into a groove, the edge margin of the rib engages the camming surfaces 68 which, due to their angled 10 configuration, creates a force acting to spread the protuberances associated with the groove apart. The protuberances are formed to be resiliently deflectable such that the protuberances can spread apart enough to allow the T-shaped edge margin of the rib to pass therebetween and such 15 that the protuberances will move back toward each other once the locking surfaces 66 of the rib pass the locking surfaces 64 of the protuberances. Thus, unlike the embodiment shown in Figure 5, the ribs of the second member need not all be parallel. It should also be appreciated that, assuming the 20 ribs are not parallel, the first member will be fully restrained with respect to the second member upon snapping the ribs into the grooves. Thus, tooling is not necessarily required to further secure the first or second members together during the sir welding operation.

Although the invention has been described in sufficient detail to allow others to practice the present invention, it should be understood that all matter contained in the above description or shown in the accompanying drawings is intended

5 to be interpreted as illustrative and not in a limiting sense and that various modifications and variations of the device and methods may be employed without departing from the scope of the invention defined by the following claims. For example, it should be appreciated that not all steps of the

10 preferred method of practicing the invention are necessarily required by each claim. Thus, with variations and modifications, other methods and devices in accordance with the invention should be appreciated.

Furthermore, it should be understood that when

15 introducing elements of the present invention in the claims or in the above description of the preferred embodiment of the invention, the terms "comprising," "including," and "having" are intended to be open-ended and mean that there may be additional elements other than the listed elements.

20 Similarly, to the extent the term "portion" is used in the claims or is added by amendment, such term should be construed as meaning some or all of the item or element that it qualifies.